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ABSTRACT

If present trends in family life and education continue into the next decade, most children under five will spend substantial proportions of their early years in various types of early childhood programs, most five- to six-year-olds will attend all-day kindergarten, and during their elementary school years they will spend much of their time before and after school in some kind of out-of-home setting. This report discusses some of the main issues involved in those trends. They are: (1) advantages and disadvantages of schooling for four-year-olds; (2) advantages and disadvantages of full-day kindergarten; (3) school entry age; (4) school readiness and screening: (5) alternative programs for those not ready: (6) retention in grade in the elementary years; (7) curriculum issues, especially curriculum "shove down" and comparative effects of different kinds of curriculum; and (8) parent involvement and parent education. A list of references is included. (PS)

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Current Issues in Early Childhood Education

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CURRENT ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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If present trends in family life and education continue into the next decade, most children under five will spend substantial proportions of their early years in various types of early childhood programs, most five- to six-year-olds will attend all-day kindergarten, and during their elementary school years they will spend much of their time before and after school in some kind of out-of-home setting.

Legislative initiatives addressed to the needs of young children have increased across the country alongside the school reform movement. By the end of 1985, at least 28 states had enacted legislation for a variety of early childhood provisions. In fact, the National Conference of State Legislatures cited early childhood education and child care as one of the most significant new areas of legislative activity in education in 1985 (Morado, 1985) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals adopted the recommendation that states should create full-day programs for all four-year-olds.

Fifteen states and the District of Columbia already fund some pre-kindergarten programs for four-year-olds in public schools (Morado, 1985). Nine states now have universal preschool education available for the handicapped, and a variety of similar initiatives is being considered in many other states. In February, 1986, the National Governors' Association held a major conference on early childhood sub-titled "Focus on the First Sixty Months" in which state officials and early childhood specialists met to consider the many problems confronting school districts as they respond to this widening trend. Some of the main issues are defined and discussed briefly below.

Four-Year-Olds in the Schools

The accelerating trend toward participation of four-year-olds in public schools is the consequence of several converging forces. The single most powerful one is certainly the growing proportion of mothers of preschoolers whose entrance into the work force gives rise to an acute need for provisions for their children. Another substantial force is the "well-publicized research documenting the positive long-term effects and cost-effectiveness of preschool programs (Morado, 1986, p. 61; Berreuta-Clement et al., 1984), particularly for those populations judged at risk for school failure. Both of these forces, augmented by the school reform movement, resulted in preschool programs becoming "part of the package" of academic reform (Morado, 1986, p. 61). Another less obvious factor contributing to the trend is the widespread excess of classroom space and teaching personnel due to shrinking enrollments in the upper primary grades in many school districts.

It should be noted, however, that some opposition to the trend toward public school programs for four-year-olds has appeared in the press as well as in some professional publications. Three major objections have been expressed. The one most frequently cited is that such programs, because they are to be conducted in schools normally serving elementary-age children, will inevitably adopt formal academic teaching methods that early childhood specialists generally consider developmentally inappropriate for under-six-year-olds (Kagan, 1985). These critics also point out that the research reporting positive long-term benefits of early education programs is based on the kind of high quality of staff and program implementation unlikely to be duplicated in most school districts (Zigler, 1986). Others who oppose the trend cite the special risks of public school programs for young black children, suggesting that such children need comprehensive programs that include health, nutrition, social services, and parent involvement, as well as informal curriculum methods (Bowman, 1985; Hymes, 1986). Such opponents suggest that the record of the public schools is one of unrelenting insensitivity to the needs of minority groups, insensitivity to which their children should not be exposed any earlier than necessary (Moore, 1986). Some opposition to this trend toward greater preschool participation for normal children has also been expressed by the Hewlitt Foundation ("Do we really want preschool?", 1984) who interpret the available evidence to suggest that young children should not be "condemned to institutional life before [they] are ready" (p. 2). The Hewlitt Foundation supports the view that young children are more likely to thrive at home with their mothers.

Hymes (1986) captures the spirit of the disputes in pointing out that for four-year-olds:

> the goal of their school is to help them live their four-year-old life with richness and vigor--not to housebreak them for becoming Five or Six. Fours will be in trouble unless there is appreciation and enjoyment of their energy, their imagination, their curiosity, their sociability, their creativity. It must be understood that the goal of their school is to nourish these strengths, not to dampen them. (p. 2)

Full-Day Kindergarten

Virtually all of the same factors mentioned in connection with the move to include four-year-olds in the schools have also contributed to the widespread adoption of full-day kindergarten programs: the steady increase in maternal employment, parental expectations that children should begin their academic training early, and the increasing belief among school officials that standards of achievement in the elementary school can be enhanced by starting children on academic careers early and using the longer day in the kindergarten as valuable academic work time. In addition, many educators and parents also hope that the provision of full-day kindergarten programs will help reduce widespread fragmentation in the lives of many young children who typically go from baby-sitter to school to day care center most days of the week.

Research on the effects of full-day versus half-day kindergarten programs is, at best, inconclusive (Glazer, 1985). As Hatcher and Schmidt (1980) suggest, research that takes into account the full range of variables associated with the longer kindergarten day is still very much needed. The measures of effectiveness taken by various school districts make comparisons difficult, and many factors related to the community, characteristics of the staff, and availability of educational resources may all contribute to the outcomes of evaluations comparing full- with half-day programs.

School Entry Age

Another issue related to those outlined above is the optimum age of school entry. As Fitzgerald, Ronk, and Howe (1986) report, there is much confusion among parents and teachers, administrators, and policy makers about the appropriate age and developmental level needed for success in the early grades in elementary school. Traditionally the schools accepted all children in kindergarten if they had reached the age of five by a given date, and the instructional program was modified to accommodate the range of developmental levels present in the group. Currently available data indicate that as few as three or four months' difference in entry age affect success in the primary grades. However, such findings are difficult to explain and to interpret since three or four months' worth of development in the fourth and fifth year of life are not associated with dramatic differences in behavior. Yet younger children seem to be retained in grade more often than their older peers. The apparent differences in success of children entering school later may be more related to teacher expectations than to real advantages of a few months' seniority in age.

Readiness

Another issue raised in connection with the inclusion of younger children in public schools and with the introduction of academic work into the kindergarten year is the assessment of children's "readiness" to profit from it. Although the term "readiness" is used widely and frequently by school personnel and parents, it is a difficult one to define. In the child development literature it has been associated with processes of maturation, in particular with physical development. However, the extent to which the concept of "readiness" can be generalized from physical to other aspects of development is a point of strident debate among specialists.

The idea that children develop at different rates, and that, within a given child, some aspects of development may lag behind others, seems well established. The correct use of the concept of developmental "readiness" is antithetical to requiring that the children "fit the curriculum." On the contrary, adherence to the concept implies a willingness to adapt the curriculum to the "readiness" the children bring to the school with them. As the concept of "readiness" is used by the schools, however, the issue seems to be whether or not a child is judged ready to benefit from an existing prespecified set of instructional activities. In order to establish a child's "readiness" to enter school, varieties of screening and testing procedures are employed.

Screening

Most school districts institute screening procedures for kindergarten placement. By means of screening they hope to minimize the chances that children will confront instructional tasks they are unready for (Fitzgerald, et al., 1986). Aside from questions about what aspects of a child's functioning should be screened before admission to kindergarten, and how extensive a sample of behavior is necessary for a reliable assessment, it is very likely to be risky as well as inappropriate to use a single measure of any kind as a basis for deciding whether a young child is ready for school. As Black points out, "While inappropriate use of standardized testing can occur at all levels of the educational ladder, it would appear that the greatest potential for harm exists during the early childhood years" (cited in Fitzgerald et al., 1986, p. 3).

In districts in which screening or testing for kindergarten "readiness" is a large-scale undertaking, problems arise over obtaining enough trained and experienced testers. The use of inexperienced and untrained volunteers for screening means that the instruments selected must be easy to use and therefore likely to be among the least valid and reliable ones available (Shepard & Smith, 1985). Often volunteers are given brief but intensive training in test administration. However, many of them drop by the wayside before the testing program can be completed, and, more often than not, untrained testers are used. The quality of the assessments obtained is questionable in such cases. The seriousness of this kind of predicament stems from knowledge that once a child has been identified as falling into a special (versus normal) category, the label is very likely to stick. The combination of poorly or non-trained testers and very young children unfamiliar with the screening or testing situation and therefore apt to be anxious, makes it very probable that important and non-negligible errors are made that could have important long-term consequences for individual children.

Alternative Programs

Once a screening or testing procedure is in place, most school districts make provisions for those children who fall below a particular "readiness" standard. Many school districts that have chosen to provide formal academically-oriented kindergarten programs adopt an alternative curriculum for these children. These alternative programs, sometimes called "junior" or "developmental" kindergarten, generally emphasize play and socialization and correspond very closely to a traditional kindergarten curriculum. While such programs delay the un-ready child's confrontation with academic work for one year, the question of whether they should enter kindergarten at the end of it or go directly to the first grade is problematic. School policies prohibiting such "developmentally delayed" children from joining their age-mates in the first grade result in wide age span in the later grades. In many communities, parents object to the age range, sometimes because younger children seem to be at an academic disadvantage, and sometimes because the younger ones are fearful of being bullied by the larger older ones.

Retention in Grade in the Elementary Years

The practice of requiring slow pupils to repeat a grade has a long history and is frequently the subject of strong sentiments among school personnel and parents. The practice of "social promotion" adopted in the 1930's has been strongly criticized in much of the recent school reform literature, and the proportion of children "retained in grade" seems to be increasing.

Research on the effects of retention in grade on both academic and social development has been inconclusive, mainly because findings are contradictory, but also because methodological problems inherent in most of the relevant studies may invalidate their results. First-grade children tend to be retained more often than any others. With children's increasing age, retention rates decline until sixth grade. They begin to climb again in seventh grade and throughout high school.

The decision to retain a child is based on diverse criteria such as classroom behavior, achievement test scores, and teacher ratings of maturity. Variations in school and teachers' philosophy also contribute to retention decisions. Without conclusive empirical evidence, policies with respect to retention and promotion are likely to be based on social norms and values and general philosophy about education and the role of the school. Among the important considerations often neglected in the heat of debate over the value of retention is the quality of the learning experiences offered to the child during his second turn in the repeated grade.

An extensive review of the available research on grade retention (Plummer, Lineberger, & Graziano, 1986) indicates that the practice of grade retention, though still very widespread, does not guarantee that the child will reach the required standards for promotion to the next grade at the end of the one-year repetition. The bulk of the evidence currently available indicates that, on balance, retention in grade is not an effective strategy for improving academic competence and may be a deleterious one with respect to social development.

Curriculum Issues in Early Childhood Education

The majority of children today enter kindergarten with at least a year, often two or three years, of prior group experience. Thus the traditional purpose of kindergarten to ease children into the transition from home to the larger outside world, has lost much of its relevance. Disputes concerning what goals make sense for the contemporary kindergarten, sandwiched as it is between preschool and first grade, have arisen in many communities.

The "Push-Down" Phenomenon

Among parents and between parents, school boards, administrators, and teachers, there are serious disagreements over the extent to which the main

goal of kindergarten is preparation for first grade and for the academic work hitherto postponed until the first-grade year. This issue is debated with such new phrases as "hothousing" (Collins, 1985), or "curriculum shove down" (Hatch & Freeman, 1986). Groups of parents, administrators, and teachers struggle with this so-called "push down" phenomenon in which play and creative activities traditionally associated with prekindergarten and kindergarten programs are replaced by formal whole-group instruction. School districts taking this approach usually put heavy emphasis on beginning reading instruction, traditionally set aside for the first grade. Several professional early childhood groups, including the 55,000-member National Association for the Education of Young Children, have issued "Position Statements" (Sub-Committee on Public Policy on Kindergarten, Chicago AEYC Commission on Child Development and Elementary Schooling, n.d.; Texas Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.; SACUS speaks out, 1986, April; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986, June) that contain strong objections to the introduction of academic work in prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Interpretation of the available evidence concerning the long-term consequences of introducing prekindergartners to formal instruction is fraught with a range of methodological difficulties. Among them are concerns with appropriate criteria of effectiveness, reliability of assessment instruments, and substantial attrition in the sample as children move up the grades and from one community to another.

Comparative Effects of Different Kinds of Curriculum Approaches

Powell (1986) points out that there has been a shift in the public debate over early education. The concern of two decades ago over whether early childhood programs have lasting benefits has now been replaced with questions about what kind of early education has the greatest long-term effectiveness. The assortment of kinds of early childhood programs can be broadly classified into two major types: formal teacher-directed approaches, sometimes referred to as didactic, versus informal child-centered models, sometimes called non-didactic. In reviewing a group of longitudinal follow-up studies comparing the effects of the two main types of early childhood programs, Powell (1986) points out that the longitudinal data suggest that the kind of early childhood program attended by low-income children may affect them through their middle-school and early teenage years. It is interesting to note that in two longitudinal studies in which the Montessori approach was included as one of the non-didactic types of early childhood programs, Montessori programs had very favorable long-term effects on the children enrolled in them (Douglas, 1986, pp. 62-63) and the effect was strongest for boys.

Results of long-term follow-up studies comparing the effects of three curriculum models conducted by the High/Scope Foundation (Schweinhart, Weikart, & Larner, 1986) indicated that 15-year-olds who had been enrolled in non-didactic informal prekindergarten programs showed significantly lower juvenile delinquency rates than age-mates who had been in formal ones. However, the sponsors of the didactic formal program dispute the interpretation of the results (Gersten, 1986). Longitudinal studies typically show that children enrolled in didactic programs in the early years show impressive

gains in IQ and achievement scores during and very soon after their experiences in the programs, but that their superiority is not sustained throughout the elementary years.

Studies comparing various early childhood models over shorter periods also raise questions about the differentiated effects of the models. Stallings (1975), for example, compared first- and third-grade children in Follow-Through classrooms varying in teacher directiveness and application of positive reinforcement. Her data indicate that children scored higher on reading and mathematics achievement tests in classes in which teachers exercised greatest control, but that in the more flexible classes children scored higher on nonverbal problem-solving and willingness to work independently and had lower absence rates (cited in Powell, 1986), suggesting more positive attitudes toward school in general. There is some suggestion in these data that a strong showing in the achievement domain may be obtained at the expense of progress in the social-emotional and attitudinal area.

Disputes between those favoring informal child-centered approaches and those committed to formal academically-oriented approaches have been observed for at least two generations of educators, and are unlikely to be resolved by empirical studies, since each side finds flaws in the data produced by the other. All in all, the comparative data now available suggest that communities planning to enroll four-year-olds and to expand their kindergarten programs to full day, face the challenge of enhancing children's academic development and their social-emotional growth at the same time. There is no a priori reason to assume that academic and social goals are mutually exclusive ones.

Parent Involvement in the Schools

The involvement of parents in their children's schools has received a great deal of attention in the school reform literature produced since 1983. In First Lessons (1986), Secretary W. J. Bennett makes a very strong pitch for various kinds of parental involvement in their children's education.

Two distinct aspects of parent-school relations have been featured in the literature: (a) parental influence on various aspects of schooling and (b) the education of parents to enhance their contribution to their child's academic progress. Much of this literature urges parents to exert their influence on the curriculum and the conduct of schooling while it also enjoins the schools to educate parents so that their children will be more receptive to schooling. There is a certain amount of irony in the suggestion that if the nation is not to be at risk the schools should be monitored and influenced by the very same people it should educate to be more competent parents!

In the meantime, teachers report that relations with parents constitute one of the greatest sources of stress they experience on the job. Much more work is required before all the potential benefits of parent involvement in the schools can be realized.

Parents' Influence on the Schools

While parents have always influenced schools in the U. S. A., the influential parents have traditionally been limited to those in the community who were both vocal and powerful. Since the mid-1960s efforts have been made to widen the representation of parents who exercise influence on school practices. Success in this effort creates a host of new problems: the wider and more colete the representation of parents in a school community, the less likely there will be consensus on what the parents want the school district to offer or withhold. Reform proposals directed toward the improvement of teaching frequently include suggestions for parental participation in teacher evaluation. In this matter as well, the more fully the community is involved in such evaluation procedures, the more likely differences of views will emerge. Thus greater involvement seems inevitably linked to increasing contentiousness between educators and their clients.

In a comprehensive review of research on parental involvement in the schools, Becher (1986) reports generally positive effects for those programs she evaluates. Specifically, she indicates that parents who become involved in their children's early childhood programs exhibit more positive attitudes toward school and school personnel than those who do not. Such parents also tend to gather greater community support for the schools' programs and become more involved in community life. In addition, some research indicates that parent involvement also leads to improved relationships between parents and children and greater contact between parents and their children's schools. Becher also notes that research shows that

> teachers, when associated with parent-involvement efforts, have become more proficient in their instructional and professional activities, allocated more of their own time to the instructional function, become more involved with the curriculum, and tended to experiement more. In addition, they have more student-oriented rather than text-oriented curricular activities...[and] there is substantial evidence indicating that children have significantly increased their academic achievement and cognitive development. (Becher, 1986, p. 95)

In summarizing the research on different approaches to parent involvement Becher (1986) lists several attibutes common to successful approaches:

1. The inclusion of parent meetings, and workshops;

2. Using parent-teacher conferences to inform parents about ways they could become involved in their child's education;

3. Increasing the amount and specificity of information transmitted to parents about their child's education and performance in the program;

4. Encouraging frequent visits to the program/school and involving parents directly in teaching activities;

5. Encouraging parents to become involved in the decision-making processes of the programs as well as evaluation activities.

Together these characteristics of parent involvement programs tended to increase parents' influence on the program and have positive effects on their children's experiences as well.

Although relatively little research has been reported on the relationships between parents and teachers, available information indicates that teacher-parent contacts have increased recently, and that increasing contacts have been initiated by both sides (Mager, 1980). Epstein (1983) reports that survey responses of parents of over 1,200 first-, third- and fifth grade students indicated that parents' attitudes toward their children's schools and teachers were generally positive. However, many parents received few or no communications from the school and few were involved with the school at all.

Parent Education

Another aspect of parent involvement is the schools' attempts to help parents in their child rearing practices in such a way as to improve their children's school performances. Once again, those parents whose children most need support, stimulation, and encouragement from home are least likely to be responsive to these efforts. Such parents typically are reported to feel ashamed and embarrassed in front of school officials. On the other hand, parents who are moderately confident in their child rearing roles are more highly responsive to assistance offered to them. There is also some reason to believe that parents are most likely to be responsive to the help available in parent education programs when their children are under six or seven years old (Durio & Hughes, 1982).

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